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Time, the Pains of Imprisonment, and 'Coping' – The Perspectives of Prisoners' Partners

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The numerous difficulties faced by prisoners' families have been well-documented since the 1960s, when Morris (1965) conducted a large-scale study on the experiences of wives of prisoners. As outlined in the introduction to this volume (Condry, this volume) these difficulties include financial impact such as the loss of a breadwinner's income (Smith *et al.* 2007, Harman, Smith and Egan 2007), feelings of loss, loneliness and grief (Fishman 1990, Daniel and Barrett 1981, Arditti 2003) and the practical difficulties associated with visiting and otherwise keeping in touch (Condry 2007, Comfort 2008). Stigma (Condry 2007, Codd 1998, Arditti 2003), too, is a serious problems identified in the literature. As Hutton (this volume) identifies, families could be stigmatised not only in the community but by prison officers when visiting their relatives in prison.

Thus far, there have been very few studies on long-term prisoners' families, even though Condry (2007), in her work on serious offenders' families, has suggested that the problems faced by prisoners' families could be exacerbated by a long sentence. Merriman (1979) found that although some relatives of long-term prisoners appeared to recover from the initial trauma of imprisonment quickly, others remained in a state of chronic bereavement throughout the long sentence. Yet as her article did not provide any empirical evidence and did not describe the methodology, the bases for these conclusions are unclear. Her work raises a number of important questions. Do the pains of imprisonment (*e.g.* Lanskey *et al.*, this volume) become in some way easier to bear with time? Or do they continue to be just as painful years into the sentence, and does imprisonment, therefore,

create an ongoing, quasi-permanent state of continued suffering? Moreover, do long sentences create unique problems for those outside?

There is also some evidence of long sentences being transformative for families outside. Comfort (2008), in her ethnographic study of families visiting prisoners in San Quentin in the US, discussed the processing procedures prison visitors undergo. She suggested that long-term exposure to penal power and penal pains inherent in these processing procedures can alter visitors in deep, complex ways over time:

When the experience of being processed is particularly intense or humiliating, one can posit that recurrent exposure to this ordeal will itself become a transformative course, especially if each occurrence is followed by immersion in a distinctively abrasive and depersonalising environment constructed to modify and control behaviour. (Comfort 2008: 28).

In order to explore how a sample of women experienced, and was transformed by, a husband's or boyfriend's long-term imprisonment, this chapter draws on theoretical tools provided by research on long-term imprisonment specifically, including emerging work on how long-term prisoners experience the pains of imprisonment over a long sentence. Lanskey *et al.* (this volume) suggest that some pains of imprisonment may be 'acute' for families outside – that is, these pains could persist throughout the sentence. This chapter explores *how* these acute pains are experienced over a long sentence by partners. As it has already been shown that sociological work on imprisonment provides excellent theoretical tools for examining the experiences of families (Comfort 2008, Kotova 2014, Lanskey *et al.*, this volume), research *on long-term* imprisonment specifically was chosen as it, too, will help us to understand the experiences of partners outside.

Theoretical framework: the pains of long-term imprisonment and coping/adaptation

In their recent study on life-sentenced prisoners, Hulley *et al.* (2016) explored how these long-term prisoners experienced the pains of imprisonment over a long sentence. They revealed that the initial psychological adjustment to a long sentence was indeed difficult for many prisoners, with pains associated with various deprivations (of social life, sexual intimacy, *etc.*) being more acutely felt in the early stages of the sentence. The authors argued that over time, life-sentenced prisoners developed coping strategies and grew used to the various deprivations associated with prison life. So although prisoners reported feeling the pains of imprisonment less strongly as time went on, the authors posited that this may be because they were fundamentally transformed by these pains. They argued that ‘the everyday pains of imprisonment are “felt” less sharply because, in some sense, they have been internalised into the prisoner’s being’ (Hulley *et al.* 2016: 786). This does not, however, indicate that the pains are felt to be in any objective sense less painful. Rather, they become a normal part of the prisoner’s everyday existence as the conceptual divide between “self” and “problem” is blurred. This process of internalisation – whereby one gets used to or numbed to the pains of imprisonment as they become a part of one’s everyday existence – will be key to understanding the experiences of long-term prisoners’ partners.

Recent work on the pains of imprisonment has also explored the increasingly ‘tight’ and uncertain nature of these pains (see Lanskey *et al.*, this volume, for an overview). For the purpose of this chapter, it is important to note that modern penal modern is characterised by minute, numerous rules and regulations (Crewe 2009, 2011, 2015). Prisoners are increasingly uncertain as to when this power will be activated and have described themselves toeing an invisible line and existing within a complex and psychologically wearisome web of penal power (Crewe 2009, 2015). This chapter reinforces Lanskey *et al.*’s findings, which confirm that families, too, experience this tightness of

penal pains. It develops the discussions further by exploring the experiences of *long-term* exposure to these minute, complex prison rules.

Beyond simply longer-term exposure to the pains of imprisonment, long sentences may also create unique problems for prisoners and their families. For example, some long sentences in the UK are indeterminate, such as life sentences and Imprisonment for Public Protection (IPP) sentences¹. This gives rise to further 'pains of indeterminacy' (Crewe 2011) in a very direct sense: the prisoners and their families do not know when the sentence will end. How do partners outside experience this indeterminacy? There is a link to be made here, also, with the concept of 'ambiguous loss' (Boss 2004), which has been applied to the experiences of prisoners' families (Arditti 2012). Ambiguous loss is the type of loss which is defined by lack of clarity and closure (Boss 2004). In the prison context, the prisoner is said to be physically absent but psychologically present. He is, therefore, removed from the family, but not in any way that provides for closure. If he had died, for example, the family would be able to grieve, and the funeral would provide a degree of closure (Arditti 2012). When a sentence is long, however, he is not simply physically absent. He is removed for an uncertain period of time. This is likely to make the family's loss doubly ambiguous. This chapter examines this long-term, double ambiguity from the perspective of prisoners' partners.

In order to explore coping and adaptation, this chapter will draw on the concept of 'institutionalisation', which is when the prisoner takes on 'the folkways, mores, customs and general culture of the penitentiary' (Clemmer 1958: 299). This process has been identified as a key coping mechanism used by prisoners in general to adapt to the pains of imprisonment (Clemmer 1958). Research on long-term imprisonment specifically has examined how long-term prisoners adapt to

¹ These sentences were abolished in 2012, but not retrospectively.

the pains of imprisonment. Firstly, over time, they can become more introverted as a way of coping with long-term separation from their families and friends and, with the other daily pains of imprisonment (Sapsford 1978, Heskin *et al.* 1973). This finding has also been reinforced by more recent qualitative studies – Crewe (2009), for instance, found that those serving the longest sentences were less likely to have friendships in prisons and generally kept themselves at a distance from other people. Liem and Kunst (2013), in a study of long-term prisoners post-release, found evidence of what they called ‘post-incarceration syndrome’. This included institutionalisation and difficulties in social interactions. What kinds of changes might partners outside undergo? This chapter shows that they, too, can become institutionalised, but also become, in other ways, more independent – an interesting paradox.

Hulley *et al.* (2016) also found evidence of introversion, adherence to institutional rules and distancing amongst their sample of life-sentenced prisoners. Yet they developed the analysis further by showing that coping with the pains of imprisonment results in fundamental, identity-level changes in the long-term prisoner. He does not simply adapt; the coping mechanisms are transformative. Hulley and her colleagues were not concerned so much with the customs, routines and mores that become internalised by long-term prisoners. Rather, their argument is that the process of adaptation is more than a surface-level coping strategy: the pains of imprisonment and adapting to them changes the prisoner as a person, on a fundamentally deep level. How partners may be similarly changed has not yet been explored.

Developing the themes of long-term exposure to the pains of imprisonment and transformation, this chapter also explores how the women's views of the criminal justice system were transformed following a prolonged exposure to the pains of imprisonment. Lee *et al.* (2014) noted that a family

member's imprisonment damaged families' trust in the criminal justice and the state. Jardine (this volume) posits that *prolonged* exposure to perceived lack of fairness when it comes to interactions with prison staff could be especially damaging to families' trust towards prison officers and the criminal justice system. This chapter develops this theme further, exploring it from the perspective of long-term prisoners' partners and arguing that long sentences could be especially damaging to partners' trust in the prison system.

A further important finding from Hulley *et al.*'s (2016) recent study is that some adaptation techniques used by prisoners could be, in the long run, maladaptive outside of the prison setting. For example, social and emotional withdrawal inside the prison could help the prisoner survive a long sentence. Yet it could also result in difficulties in maintaining social relationships outside, especially upon release. Anecdotal evidence drawn from first-hand accounts of long-term prisoners (*e.g.* Warr 2012) suggests this could indeed be the case. Again, however, whether coping mechanisms used by partners outside may be maladaptive needs to be considered.

Methods and sample

This paper draws on interviews conducted with 33 female partners (married and unmarried) or long-term male prisoners serving a determinate sentence of at least 10 years² or an IPP of life sentence. The participants were recruited via charitable organisations, social media, and an advertisement placed in Inside Time, a national prison newspaper. There was no minimum time served stipulated as this could have made the sample too narrow, and so participants were at different stages of what one called 'the prison journey'. However, all had experienced at least one year of a partner's

² One participant's husband was serving a sentence that fell just short of the 10-year minimum. Since the shortfall was minimal, it was decided that her interview would be included.

imprisonment, with the longest being 28 years. In a small number of cases, the prisoner had been released before the interview.

All but three interviews were conducted face-to-face, with three conducted over the phone due to practical challenges of meeting in person (such as a participant's ill health). Most were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. Three of the women opted for handwritten notes instead as they did not want their voices to be recorded. The face-to-face interviews took place in neutral private locations, which included private function rooms in cafes and conference rooms in hotels. The women interviewed lived all over England and Wales, with one living in Scotland and one in Northern Ireland. They thus provided their views on different prisons in different parts of the country. Some women visited prisons regularly, some less regularly, and a very small number were unable to visit for health-related reasons, or because it was too far to travel.

It should be noted that it took 24 months to access the participants and conduct the interviews, which is not surprising considering that this population is hidden and often stigmatised. As such, a flexible approach to recruitment was necessary. The vast majority of the women were in ongoing relationships with the prisoners, although what this meant was not always straightforward. One participant was in a complex co-parenting relationship with the imprisoned father of her children, though she felt she was no longer in an intimate relationship with him, and another was the ex-partner of long-term prisoner. Their stories were, nonetheless, valuable and were therefore included. Participants who met their partners while working in a prison were also included, but it was stipulated that they must have been in a relationship with the prisoner for at least a year. Even though these women had not experienced the arrest and sentencing of a partner, they still felt many of the pains of imprisonment, and also had to cope with a partner's long-term imprisonment. All but

one of the women reported having little to no prior experience of the criminal justice system, and only one had been in prison herself.

The participants were overwhelmingly White British. One was Mixed British and another Black British. Most of the women were aged 40 and above, with eight participants in their 20s and 30s. Although no claims to generalisability can be made due to the self-selective nature of the sample, the interviews do provide unique insights into the experiences of partners over a long sentence. After all, many of the pains of long-term imprisonment, such as indeterminacy, are likely to be experienced by all partners, regardless of their age, ethnicity and socio-economic backgrounds. Where appropriate, however, this chapter refers to the specific characteristics of this sample. It will be recognised also that female partners' experiences may be in some ways different to those of other prisoners' relatives: for example, the loss of a prisoner's everyday physical presence may be more acutely felt by a partner whose household he shared than by relatives who only saw him occasionally. Gender, too, may play a role where women had enacted traditional gender role prior to imprisonment – this too will be recognised.

'They kept on saying, numbers and numbers...'

For the women in this sample, a partner receiving a prison sentence was in and of itself a deeply traumatic event (Lanskey *et al.*, this volume, Condry 2007). However, the length of sentence exacerbated this. The length of the sentence was often overwhelming for the women, because their minds struggled to comprehend the meaning of this long period of time of separation.

Amanda: It's like, when [husband] got sentenced, I don't remember... I was just numb. I just sat there, and I couldn't even cry. 'Cos they kept on saying, numbers and numbers, and I was

thinking, this isn't right, this... I couldn't even sort of take it in, how many years they'd actually said, in the end. It was my niece that told me, she said – 'that's 18 years!'.

This was the case even for those women who met their partners during the current prison sentence, and therefore had not gone through the arrest and sentencing stages. Realising that they were in love with someone serving a long sentence was difficult for these women, and one reason for this was precisely because they knew their new partner was serving not just a prison sentence, but a long one at that. Lisa, for example, said that realising she was in love with a life-sentenced prisoner was 'deeply shocking' for her, partially because of the length of his sentence.

A further reason why the length of the sentence was felt to be so problematic was precisely its ambiguity. If a sentence was determinate but long – that is, if the release date was known – there was, at times, uncertainty surrounding the relationship. Some of the women could not always be sure whether they would stay in the relationship as it was difficult to plan that far ahead when they could not be sure how they and/or their partners would change over time. There is strong empirical evidence of long sentences changing prisoners, as discussed earlier in this chapter, and the women realised that the man who went in might not be the man who came out after a long sentence. Unlike biological family, the women had a degree of choice as to whether they continued to maintain the relationship or not. Unlike mothers, fathers, and other relatives, partners can elect to permanently sever their ties to the prisoner. This element of choice made the long sentence, for them, more complexly ambiguous. Mary, for example, was looking forward to her boyfriend being released. Their relationship was, at the time of the interview, positive, but she felt some uncertainty about the future. Others, such as Elizabeth, explicitly said they could not guarantee they would sustain the relationship over the entire sentence, as it was simply too long to make those guarantees.

Mary: But we talk about the future, we plan the future, so our assumption is that we're gonna be together. But like with any relationship, you never know. Because he might come out and completely have a meltdown, or, you know, not be able to handle the change and stuff after all these years.

Elizabeth: I mean I've always, always said to him – 'I cannot guarantee that I'm gonna be around. I can't.' D'you know what, nobody can guarantee. Even if you were in a married relationship where it [the relationship] was perfectly normal.

When a sentence was indeterminate, such as a life sentence or IPP sentence, the loss was doubly ambiguous. Firstly, like all prisoners' partners, the women experienced ambiguous loss in the sense that the prisoner was physically absent but psychologically present. Martha described having a partner in prison as 'a bereavement, but without that finality of death', confirming Arditti's (2012) analysis of the ambiguity of loss arising out of imprisonment. Another participant described herself as living in a 'limbo', also highlighting the lack of resolution or finality when it comes to having a partner in prison.

Secondly, these women knew that this state of 'limbo' would continue *indefinitely* if the sentence was indeterminate. Planning for the future was, thus, near impossible, as the women and their partners did not know when the imprisoned partner would be released. Sarah described the uncertainty that came along with this loss when the sentence was indeterminate:

Sarah: It's that uncertainty, you know? [...] As I've explained to a friend of mine, not being funny, anyone with a fixed sentence, they're in a situation where they can say to themselves – 'well, my husband is gonna get out in four or five years', or whatever. [...] But for lifers and IPPs, they can't do that. Because they don't know when they're gonna get out.

'You settle into it. You adapt'.

This study confirms much of the earlier work on the pains of imprisonment as experienced by prisoners' families (see Condry, Kotova and Minson 2016 for an overview). In summary, the women who participated in this study discussed being 'secondarily prisonised' (Comfort 2008), that is, being exposed to muted and temporary versions of the pains of imprisonment prisoners experience. Visiting was often practically and financially difficult, and time-consuming, even if the distances the women had to travel were shorter than those reported in the US (Christian 2015). Likewise, the overwhelming majority experienced a decrease in their disposable income following their partners' imprisonment. This was either because they lost their own jobs due to stigmatisation, through the loss of their partners' incomes or welfare benefits. When visiting, the women were exposed to numerous prison rules and supervision, and their communication with the prisoner (phone calls and letters) was also scrutinised. The findings, therefore, reinforce the findings discussed by a number of contributors to this volume (*e.g.* Hutton, this volume).

Moreover, the women also described themselves becoming tangled up in the web of penal power, further reinforcing Lanskey *et al.*'s findings (this volume). The partners had to become used to numerous, and at times discretionarily applied, visiting rules and other prison regulations. For example, one women said some officers would allow her to wear a belt to visit and others did not, and concluded that she felt some officers were 'playing' and 'making things a bit ridiculous'. Other

said they were never sure when phone calls would be listened to by officers, and what these officers were listening out for. What kind of impact did this have over the course of a long sentence?

One of the key questions this study sought to examine was whether these pains of imprisonment became less painful over time. Certainly, it comes as no surprise that arrest and sentencing were traumatic for most partners (see Condry 2007, Comfort 2008, Lanskey *et al.*, this volume). The participants also discussed visiting being stressful and upsetting in the early stages of the sentence. As most of them had never visited a prison before, they found visitation rules to be complex, some officers to be abrupt and abrasive, and the visiting environment stressful and tense due to the high levels of supervision and their lack of familiarity with the prison setting. This section is concerned with what happened when these pains were experienced for a long time.

As time went on, the women got used to visiting and got to know the numerous prison rules and regulations. When they were asked if the 'prison journey' became easier as time went on, many initially responded with an unequivocal 'yes'. Yet, this was not quite so simple. Upon a careful analysis of the interviews, it became clear that the pains of imprisonment did not become objectively less painful. Like the prisoners in Hulley *et al.*'s (2016) study, the women indicated that these pains became interwoven with the very fabric of their everyday lives. Although, in practical terms, things got easier as the women become well-acquainted with the prison rules, on an emotional level, they still felt the "sting" of penal power well into the sentence.

This complex nature of adjusting the pains of imprisonment over a long sentence was highlighted by the women who struggled to give a clear response to the 'does it get easier' question. Words such as 'settle into' and 'adapt' were used to describe the process of adaptation. These phrases evoke a

sense of longevity, of imprisonment becoming a part of the women's lives. Yet these words do not imply that the pains are felt any less sharply; rather, they are still there, simmering in the background. Consider the following quote, which shows that getting used to something unpleasant does not make it any less painful:

Martha: D'you know what, I don't think it gets easier. I think you settle into it. You adapt.

In fact, some women themselves struggled to understand whether they were still suffering or not. They got so used to a state of being inclusive of the pains of imprisonment and the associated stressors that, over time, they started to forget what their lives were like before imprisonment. As Casey described below, the pains became so normal that the women's reference points changed. Living with the pains of imprisonment became the norm for them.

Casey: I don't actually know if I am still suffering as much or whether I've just got used to it [her partner's imprisonment]. It is difficult. I do know, deep down, that I am suffering. You know, I am suffering with depression, I can't sleep. I am on tablets, and the time I would be sleeping I... I suffer with anxiety and I get spots and stress migraines and things like that. I think it's happened for so long I'm just sort of getting used to it.

Again, ambiguity may help us understand why the pains of imprisonment did not seem to become less painful over the course of a long sentence. When a sentence is long, and especially when it is long and indeterminate, there is no sense of an ending and little closure. The women were separated from their partners but still in touch with them, however infrequently. The sense of loss

the women felt, for example, did not get any less painful. This was because the loss was not concrete, as with loss through a partner's death, and the period of grief became a quasi-permanent one. It is also possible that partners feel this ambiguous loss more sharply than other prisoners' relatives because the physical absence of a partner could be more acutely felt than the physical absence of another relatives. Partners, after all, are more likely to spend more of their time together, especially if they share a household and if the relationship was in general stable and positive (the majority of the participants in this study described precisely such relationships). Therefore, when a partner is imprisoned, his other half may feel the loss to a greater extent than relatives who care for the prisoner just as much, but who did not share his daily life with him and for whom, therefore, his physical absence may not be as have been as pronounced as for partners. This was explained by Casey:

Casey: I don't mean to say that a partner's pain is worse, but you have got to understand that if you're partners with someone in prison, you do share your whole life with them. It's not just... Obviously, they [other relatives] might love them a bit more because they're family, you know, but the point is, yeah, you share everything with that person. So once they go, you sort of... It's like your life's been cut right in half. It's not just something's been cut out of it, it's like everything's just gone. When they go, everything goes.

Moreover, the partners outside were exposed to the pains of imprisonment when they visited, received phone-calls, and wrote letters. This state of being was to continue for years to come and, when sentences were indeterminate, the women did not know when their exposure to the pains of imprisonment would end. Combined with the ambiguity of a physically absent but psychologically present partner/ex-partner, this was challenging indeed. Elly described feeling this dread of being

quasi-permanently exposed to the pains of imprisonment prior to getting married to her life-sentenced husband:

Elly: I think a bit of me knew [before the wedding] what was going to happen. A bit of me knew that I was actually going to become part of this prison thing. I can't express it very well, and what the consequences of that would be. And I didn't want it [the prison experience]. No normal person would want that. Being told when you can see your husband, the conditions when you can see him, where you can talk to him... Not really actually having a life with him that hasn't been observed by others...

The fact that the pains of imprisonment were tight in nature, as discussed in the previous section, also meant that the women were kept constantly “on edge”. They had to continuously navigate complex, minute prison rules and regulations, and appeared to be unable to simply settle into their “prison journey”. Esther, below, describes the frustrations that came along with a decade of what she felt were arbitrarily applied visiting rules. The lack of clarity surrounding the application of penal power was frustrating for her, and she saw officers as using this lack of clarity in order to play power games with prisoners and their partners.

Esther: The Prison Service, to me, is the biggest, most... I dreaded, for years, I think, 'how am I gonna be treated this week? What sort of rubbish am I gonna have to contend with with these people?' [...] Every single week, I think, 'what type of person is gonna search me today, is it gonna be one that's gonna be polite and smile or one that's gonna say “you can't wear

your scarf this week". 'I've worn a scarf last week'. 'No you didn't! We don't allow scarves'. I said - 'I've worn a scarf last week'. 'No, you can't, go back and put it in your locker'³.

At times, moreover, the pains of imprisonment struck out with renewed strength. The experience of imprisonment the women described was not simply a highly traumatic early stage followed by a process of adaptation. Many of the women likened their experiences to an 'emotional rollercoaster', a phrase that came up time and again. A wedding song might remind the partner outside of the fact that her partner is in prison and sharply bring out feelings of sadness and loneliness, for example:

Martha: You know, anniversaries are always a bit of a rough one. [...] Yeah, it's just hard, you know, they're not there. They're not there to celebrate it.

Prison institutions in this country also do not operate on the basis of identical rules. Thus, adapting to a partner's imprisonment it was not as simple as just getting to the practicalities of staying in touch with him. If the partner was moved, the woman outside had to re-adjust to new rules, new staff, and new institutional attitudes. This would cause a renewed emotional upheaval. Lisa, for instance, said that she found it 'difficult to adjust to a different routine' every time her partner was moved to a different prison.

The rollercoaster metaphor, however, also implies the presence of emotional highs. Notably, most of the women focused on the lows – the lonely special occasions, the nights they could not sleep, and the failed appeals. It seemed that there were many more lows than highs, suggesting that,

³ Quote previously published (in part) in Kotova (2015)

perhaps, the experience was less of a rollercoaster and more of an initial period of shock, followed by an emotional plateau with a number of troughs. There were, however, some examples of emotional highs. For instance, permission to appeal the conviction being granted, a positive visit, or the prisoner being transferred to a prison closer to where his partner lives, thereby making visitation easier for her, could all evoke feelings of joy and relief. These, however, could also transform into feelings of crushing defeat if the appeal was unsuccessful, for example.

'And you change because of it...'

This section turns to the theme of transformation. We know that prisoners are transformed by long sentences, but are partners outside similarly changed? The women who participated in this study did not just internalise the pains of imprisonment. This internalisation resulted in them being changed. Adapting to the pains of imprisonment, thus, led to 'deep and profound impact on the person so that the process of coping leads to fundamental changes in the self' (Hulley *et al.* 2016).

Lisa confirmed this in her interview:

Lisa: You do it [undertake the 'prison journey'] because you have to do it, and then you get used to it. And you change because of it, and you become someone who, that's part of your identity, the fact that you've done this, the fact that you've survive this⁴.

Yet in what ways were the women transformed? One sense in which they were changed was, quite simply, the fact of the prison becoming a normalised part of their existence. This is made clear in the quote above. Most of the women described themselves as coming from ordinary, relatively

⁴ Quote previously published in Kotova (2015)

untroubled backgrounds, which made visiting prisons, adhering to prison rules and experiencing penal power as something alien and unusual. After a time, the prison wove itself into their lives and identities as the women adjusted to the pains and deprivations. Holly said, for example, that 'this' – the prison – was now her life.

Furthermore, some of the women became, to various degrees, institutionalised themselves. They, in this sense, became 'secondarily prisonised' (Comfort 2008) because they adopted some of the prison norms, such as prison language and prison routines. Some used terms such as 'screws' (officers), 'prop' (property), 'canteen' (prison shop), and so on. Most were extremely knowledgeable about the prison routine and described highly structured patterns of communication with their partners. Having this degree of knowledge was necessary, because the women needed to know when their partners would call them. Some would structure their days, to various extent, around this prison routine, in order to ensure they were be available to receive a phone call. When this routine was interrupted, the partners could get anxious or distressed, which shows the extent to which they became dependant on the prison routine over time:

Judy: You get so much into a routine of they phone on this day, they phone at that time, they write on this day. And when that doesn't happen... [...] You sit and you count down, you know, what lock-up times are. So, you know... So between quarter past twelve and quarter past two I can go out 'cos he's in bang-up for lunch. And then he goes back in bang-up about five, he goes back out at quarter to six, but he's back in bang-up for night at quarter to seven... So I can do something between these hours. The prison shapes our lives as well, very much so. Because we work around their bang-up times. And you get a day when they don't fit into the routine that we're in, because we're so institutionalised by it, and it's panic.

Absolute panic. Has he been moved? Is he down the block? Does he not love me anymore?
Have I been dumped? The world's gonna end! [laughs]

Despite becoming to some extent institutionalised, the women who had lived with their partners prior to imprisonment described becoming, in their daily lives, more independent. Unlike prisoners, who are deprived of their outside lives, the women had to go to work, look after children, maintain the household, and otherwise keep their lives going without the presence, support and help of their partners (see Codd 2000). This meant that they *had* to become more independent. After all, they could not just put their lives on hold until their partners were released – the sentences were too long for that. For the women who had, prior to imprisonment, enacted traditional gender roles, this independence was a significant change. Whereas they were used to sharing everything with their husbands or boyfriends, they now had to live independent, separate lives. Yet it would be wrong to suggest that they were simply passive subjects and that independence was forced upon them. Many realised that independence would make their 'prison journey' easier, and explicitly chose it as a coping mechanism. Anne, for example, was beginning to travel without her husband and enjoying herself without him. She discussed at length her active attempts at going out alone and enjoying the small pleasures of everyday life, such as going out for a walk alone and travelling without her husband:

Anne: I need to enjoy doing that [doing things like travelling] without him. I haven't taken a holiday, now, since he went in. We would have taken a couple of holidays, like, maybe only weekend to a hotel in Ireland. And a foreign holiday or something. But now his sixteen-year-old daughter and I are going to Rome in the summer, for just a five-day thing. [...] But I know that next year, why, I might go on my own! And I would enjoy it.

The above is more likely to be a stronger theme for partners than for other relatives. As discussed earlier, other relatives are less likely to have shared their daily lives with the prisoner prior to imprisonment. Partners are more likely to need to become independent as they may need to do everything they used to do with their partner, alone. Of course, this may not necessarily be the case if they had not lived with the prisoner or if the prisoner did not contribute much to the household in practical terms. However, the women who participated in this study primarily described tightly entwined, close relationships, and for them, especially those who had enacted traditional gender roles, having to become more independent was a significant form of transformation. Some described having to learn household maintenance skills, for example.

The tight nature of the pains of imprisonment also meant that the women had to become more assertive and more independent in order to navigate the prison system. Complex prison rules and lack of clarity as to when and how these rules will be applied meant that some women felt they had to learn to stand up for themselves. Esther, quoted in the previous section, said she had gotten 'braver' over the years, and described making three official complaints against officers. Paradoxically, however, this could be seen as further evidence of her becoming entangled in the prison system: she appeared to be very knowledgeable when it came to prison regulations and the complaints process. Tightness could, therefore, lead to further entanglement in the web of penal power if partners feel like they need to become further entangled in order to navigate the complexities of prison rules.

A minority of the women discussed making conscious decisions to live lives that were primarily independent of the prison system and its routines. This usually occurred well into the sentence, as

the women became aware of having become entangled in the prison regime to an extent they were not happy with. Again, this shows that the women were active agents using independence to make their situations more bearable. Elly had met her husband in prison, and they had been married for more than a decade at the time of the interview. She said that she was ensuring her daily life was no longer shaped around the prison routine, partially because she was unhappy for it to be thus shaped:

Anna: So your daily routine isn't really dictated by the prison routine?

Elly: I think no, not anymore... I think, it's something that happened a few years ago, the wake-up call – is that the term? Where you think – what have I done? You know, what have I done? I've spent all these years and I've got nothing for it. I think that... I probably had a turn-round in my attitude then and thought – I'm not going to let what goes in prison... Well, I'm not going to let what [husband] does in prison bother me so much.

Codd (2000), in her research on older partners of prisoners, raised the question whether such independence could be short-lived and whether, upon their partners' release from prison, the women might return to traditional gender roles. The women in this sample indicated that the change was a deep-rooted one. It may be that when a sentence is long, independence as a coping mechanism is internalised to the point where it changed the women permanently. For example, Sandra's husband had been released shortly before the interview and she found that she had become so used to living alone and being independent that having him back was 'like having an alien in the house'. This echoes the theme of permanent, deep transformation that occurs in the course of a long sentence as discussed by Hulley *et al.* (2016) in their work on long-term prisoners.

Hulley *et al.* (2016) argued that some adaptation strategies could be maladaptive. There was a sense in which greater independence, specifically, could be damaging for the relationship post-release. The prisoner and his partner may struggle to adapt to living together if she has become accustomed to living her own life and making independent decisions – a concern echoed by a number of the participants, such as Martha, quoted below. This was already happening to Sandra at the time of her interview, as discussed above.

Martha: I can see some barneys happening [when her partner is released]. Because I think I've become a much stronger, more independent person, as I said... So I'd hate it to come to the stage where it's a battle of the wills, almost. [...] I think it's gonna be a lot of getting to know each other all over again.

Likewise, the fact that the women adapted to imprisonment by becoming prisonised could be seen to be maladaptive. Their lives were often negatively affected by this in the sense that their daily schedules were shaped around the prison schedule, which, as discussed earlier, resulted in distress when these routines were interrupted. The women certainly did not feel this was a positive development themselves, but were resigned to this secondary institutionalisation. As one participant said, 'you have to do it [embark on the prison journey]'.

Furthermore, some became very mistrustful of the prison system and its staff, which could certainly be seen as a maladaptive coping mechanism if they, in general, saw the state and penal authority as being unworthy of their trust. Esther, quoted earlier in this chapter, certainly saw prison officers as unpleasant people who were deliberately playing power games with visitors. This quasi-permanent state of suspicion and tension could also be maladaptive if it completely transforms how the women

see the criminal justice system. Certainly, some maintained that their 'prison journey' meant they would never trust the police and other criminal justice agents again. Some of this was possibly due to so many participants maintaining their partners were victims of false accusations and injustice, but *numerous, repeated* negative experiences of interactions with prison staff reinforced the view that the system on the whole was not worthy of their trust. As Lee *et al.* (2014) note, this loss of trust could mean families were less willing to participate in other systems of governance.

Concluding thoughts

As this chapter has shown, imprisonment can have a dramatic, and often highly negative impact on the lives of prisoners' partners. This has been well-documented in earlier research on this topic and in numerous chapters in this volume. To develop this literature further, this chapter considered the experiences of long-term prisoners' partners specifically, and explored the temporal aspect of the pains of imprisonment. It showed that long sentences can be transformative for partners outside. Over time, the prison weaves itself into the daily lives of the partners, changing them on an identity level. Yet as time draws on, the pains of imprisonment do not become less painful. Like long-term prisoners (Hulley *et al.* 2016), the women spoke about getting used to the pains of imprisonment = sometimes to the point where they themselves were unsure if they were suffering anymore. The pains became so normalised that they faded into the background, but still continued to be felt. Prolonged exposure to these penal pains was also, in numerous and complex ways, transformative for partners outside.

These findings show that sociology of imprisonment can benefit greatly from further understanding of the experiences of prisoners' families. Prisons are, after all, not hermetically sealed institutions. Penal power reaches into the lives of those outside, and when a sentence is long, this reach could be

even more acutely felt, and for a long period of time. In order to understand the full impact of long sentences, we need to consider how everyone is affected by them, not just prisoners and prison officers. The need to explore the perspectives of prisoners' families and communities in order to gain a full understanding of imprisonment as a method of punishment has already been recognised by prison sociologists such as Ben Crewe (2009, 2015) and Alison Liebling (2004).

Finally, as the analyses in this and Lanskey's *et al.*'s chapter (this volume) show, prison sociology provides useful theoretical tools for exploring the lives experiences of prisoners' families. By explicitly drawing on prison sociology, the perspectives of families can be put more firmly on the agenda of prison sociology and therefore inform debates surrounding imprisonment and punishment more broadly.

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